BUILD
UNIVERSES

Oussama Safraoui

Keys to Air

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www.europebooks.co.uk | info@europebooks.co.uk

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Keys to Air

To

Native Americans and Australian Aborigines,

I admire you, and I deeply wish things would have gone a better, more peaceful way.

and

to

Bettany Hughes

On a cold January night, the Sage and his assistant Mohab were having dinner by the fireplace. After dinner, Mohab grabbed a book and started reading, while the Sage sat in his rocking chair.

An hour later, Mohab closed his book and yawned, and he went to his room to sleep. The Sage still sat on his favorite chair for some time, and then he went to his room to sleep too.

It was a calm night, and thin cold breezes played with tree branches. Before the break of dawn, the Sage woke up to the faint sound of some careful steps near the main door. He listened carefully, but he heard nothing, so he went back to sleep.

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Chapter 1

In the morning, after breakfast, Mohab went out jogging as usual in the alleys of the village, while the Sage began his daily walk in the garden with a serene smile on his face. He enjoyed the fresh morning air and the greenery around him.

When Mohab returned, they headed toward the house. Mohab saw a note hanging next to the door, so he hurried and grabbed it, read it quickly, and then gave it to the Sage. It was a letter.

The Sage was surprised about it, but he remembered the faint steps he heard last night. He began reading the letter, and as he was reading, Mohab saw signs of concern on his face.

They entered the house, and they sat by the fireplace.

The Sage said:

- Would you please read the letter again, Mohab.

Mohab took the letter, and read:

I have always been a man of actions more
than words

few words, fewer letters:
air being overly menaced by water

high in the sky, find keys there
they are surrounded by thin air

two palaces lead to one palace:

when you're near you're far
when you're far you're near

a new palace from the past
with a big gate cannon's blast

Valsiecho

Mohab folded the letter and asked the Sage:

- Who is this Valsiecho, sir?

The Sage fell into silence and stared into the void for a while. He answered:

- Valsiecho was my childhood best friend. His name was Rached. We grew up together in this village, and we used to spend time together playing, reading and exploring the surrounding areas. We used to sit a lot in the Great Tower east of our village, playing chess, reading stories and meditating on the top floor. One particular passion we shared was exploring the world map. We spent a lot of time looking at the map in admiration; we examined the continents, countries, oceans and seas with wonder!

One day, we went camping with a group of children. At night, as we were sitting around the fire, a child unintentionally pushed Rached with his elbow. Rached fell face first into the fire. We quickly pulled him out, but his face had burned and was deformed. He looked like a monster. And since that day he became the mockery of all the children in the village. I tried to dissuade them from that disgraceful behavior, but in vain. I tried to console my friend, but he chose to distance himself from everyone. Rached isolated himself, and since then he always wore a strange black mantle and a red scarf covering his face.

In his isolation, he read books, he devoured thousands of them. He learned a lot and became a great savant. Unfortunately, his feelings of hatred made him hostile, and his vast knowledge made him arrogant. Feelings of hostility and arrogance grew within him until he became a frightening monster. He changed his name to

Valsiecho. And then one day, he disappeared, and no one saw him ever again, and everyone forgot about him.

The Sage shook his head and wiped his face as if he awoke from a terrifying nightmare. He said:

- Son, knowledge is an endless ocean. Knowledge is the path to humility. As we learn more, we get to know that what we know is much less than what we do not know, and so we become more humble. Humility grows as knowledge accumulates. Unfortunately, Valsiecho's vast knowledge took him the wrong way.

He sighed, and continued:

- It seems that Valsiecho is planning to bring disarray to the village that once humiliated him continuously when he was a child.

Mohab listened attentively, and then said:

- For now, I suggest that we begin analyzing the content of this ambiguous letter, as its words seem to have much more meaning than it looks.

The Sage turned to Mohab, saying:

- Yes, son.

- In the fourth line, we have six words; so we must find a word with less than six letters.

- How about we try to take the last letter of each word and see if a word comes up.

- r-g-y-d-y-r

- That does not make any sense. Let's take the first letter of each word.

Mohab said slowly:

- a-b-o-m-b-w

Then he said, startled:

- There is the word 'bomb'!

The Sage caressed his beard, while Mohab, disturbed, shouted:

- There is a bomb in the village!

- Yes, but where? What could the word “water” refer to?

Mohab thought for a second, and popped his fingers saying:

- The well, of course!

The Sage nodded approvingly saying:

- We should check the well and look for any strange objects there.

- I agree. But is this bomb meant to destroy the whole village?

- Let's put the word “air” into consideration.

After some thinking, Mohab said:

- Yes! The bomb is threatening the air, so it is kind of a gas bomb!

- That is the only logical explanation, son. So let’s go check the village well. Go gather the seven giants. We will need their help.

- Ok. But sir, if this Valsiecho wants to harm us, why does he write us a letter full of clues?

- Valsiecho is a brilliant man. His self-confidence reaches narcissism. He admires his genius and thinks that no one can match it. He believes that it is impossible for us to deactivate the bomb. So he is mocking us by giving us some shadowy indications. He is just giving us false hope, like a cat plays around with a mouse, catching and letting it run away many times, and then it eventually catches and eats it. For him, it is just an entertaining game; he plays us like pieces on a chessboard.

Mohab gathered the seven giants, and the Sage brought a long, sturdy rope. Everyone came around the well to search for the bomb.

Mohab fastened himself tightly with the rope and held a torch in his right hand. The giants lowered him into the well slowly and cautiously.

He examined the walls of the well carefully. Suddenly, he saw a big black box fixed into the wall, right above the water level. He inspected it closely. He read at the top “sunset”, and below he saw a cavity in which the number 9 was written, and in front of it the word “days”. At the bottom, there were seven cavities with letters in red. Mohab did not touch the box; he rather pulled the rope strongly, so the giants lifted him out of the well.

Mohab thanked the giants, and he said to the Sage:

- There is a big black box. At the top, it is written “sunset”. There is a cavity that specifies the number of days, and below there are seven cavities with scattered red letters.

The Sage caressed his beard thinking:

- What is the number written on the box, son?

- 9

- The bomb has been programmed to blow up in 9 days, at sunset on the ninth day. So we have 9 days to find the secret word that disables the bomb before it explodes. The word should be made of seven letters.

- What if we took the bomb out and discarded it safely?

- As long as the bomb is active, it could be very sensitive. It could be a real danger to move it. And you did well by not touching it.

Mohab thought for a moment, and said:

- But can we not just cover the well firmly and not let the gas escape?

- Remember son, the well is our only source of water. Besides, if I know Valsiecho well, the blow would be so powerful it would destroy any coverings.

- We could leave our village for a month or two, and then when the air is clean again we can come back.

- An interesting idea. But son, we are not the only living creatures threatened by the poisonous gas. Think about the plants and the animals. If the bomb explodes, it would be an environmental catastrophe!

Then, the Sage requested that the giants gather the villagers. When all assembled near the well, he stood among them and said:

- I must inform you of a threat that puts our village in serious danger. Do you remember Valsiecho?

An anxious murmur spread among the villagers. The Sage waited until calm reigned again, and then he continued saying:

- He is back. He intends to destroy our village in revenge! He planted a gas bomb inside our well. The bomb could be too sensitive to remove. We must search for the secret word to disable it. We do not have much time, just nine days.

Our hero Mohab is going to undertake this quest. And we need another person to be his travelling companion. Whoever wants to go through this quest with Mohab, come early this afternoon to my house.

The Sage and Mohab spent the rest of the morning preparing for the adventure. At 1:00 pm, a black girl, roughly the same age as Mohab, came to the Sage's house and introduced herself by the name of Afifa. Everyone

sat in the garden, and the Sage explained the situation to Afifa.

Afifa said:

- In my opinion, the first step we should do is to look for the keys.

The Sage nodded in approval and said:

- You are right, Afifa. Let me read the part that tells about the keys in the letter:

“High in the sky, find keys there

They are surrounded by thin air”

Mohab said:

- We should be looking at a high place nearby.

The Sage caressed his beard thinking, and then he said:

- If I know Valsiecho well, he should have hidden the keys in the Great Tower. So you should hurry and go search there.

Mohab and Afifa headed to the tower, and went up to the seventh floor. As they were climbing the stairs, Mohab told Afifa the details of his last epic adventure that led him to vanquish the giants and liberate them from their evils. They reached the seventh floor, and started searching it thoroughly, but they did not find anything.

Afifa said in bewilderment:

- What now?

Mohab thought for a while, and then looked to Afifa saying:

- Remember the words of the letter, my friend: “surrounded by thin air”.

Afifa took some time thinking, and then she said cheerfully:

- Let's check the rooftop!

Mohab smiled, and they both climbed out the window and onto the rooftop, and there they found a lonely chest hanging in the air by a rope attached to an iron bar. They opened the chest, and there was a bag full of maps. They were surprised to find maps rather than keys! They took the bag and went back to the village. The Sage welcomed them with a calm, enthusiastic smile.

They sat in the garden, and the Sage checked the bag. He found seven artful maps drawn very meticulously. Each map represented a continent, with clear details of its countries and some specific locations. He examined them attentively for a while, and then he turned to Mohab and Afifa saying:

- The surface of the Earth is around 71% water and 29% land. Water is divided into five oceans: the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Indian, the Southern and the Arctic Oceans. Land is divided into seven continents: Africa, Europe, North America, South America, Antarctica, Asia and Australia. We have here maps of the seven continents. Each map leads to a key.

Now, this is interesting. In each continent, there is a specific small owl picture. These owl locations could be where the keys are. But I know Valsiecho well; he would not make this quest as easy as that. I guess the owl locations are where you will find some kind of hints or clues that will lead you to the keys.

You will be departing each night for a different continent, and tonight is your first adventure.

He brought two leather flasks full of water and two large bags. He opened the bags in front of Mohab and Afifa and said:

- These are your provisions. In each bag, there is a bottle of honey, and a lot of light dates. These dates are very nutritional, and they are so translucent that light pierces through.

Afifa said:

- But do we have time to rest before departing?

The Sage responded smiling:

- Well, the clock is ticking, Afifa. We have to act fast and use the remaining days and nights wisely. You will be travelling on your giant whooper swans, Yumn and Baraka. You will carry sleeping bags, so you will have enough time to sleep peacefully on your giant birds during their flight. Yumn and Baraka have the special ability of flying to the speed of sound at a gentle, steady pace.

Then the Sage said addressing Mohab:

- Each night, I suggest that you tell Afifa information about the continent you will be visiting. And your first destination will be Africa.

Afifa said smiling:

- I beg your pardon, sir, but I guess I will be telling Mohab about Africa tonight!

The Sage smiled back and said:

- Ok, Afifa. Now, in order to distinguish the keys, let's name them as such: Key of Freedom, Key of Justice, Key of Awareness, Key of Openness, Key of Creativity, Key of Teamwork, and Key of Inner Peace.

After you gather all the keys, you will be going to the two palaces where you will seek information about the third palace. Valsiecho must have hidden the secret word in the third palace in a chest, and you will be able to open it using the seven keys.

Thinking about the two riddles that refer to the two palaces at the end of the letter, I actually have some ideas, but I need to do more research. So until you collect all the keys, I hope I will have solved the riddles, and then we can figure out the exact location of the secret word which we will use to deactivate the gas bomb.

Now, it is almost sunset, so get ready for your first adventure.

* * * * *

Chapter 2: Key of Freedom

The Sage took a map out of the large bag, looked at it, and then gave it to Mohab saying:

- Your first destination is the Sahara Desert in Africa, more specifically Northern Niger. The key you will be bringing from Africa is the Key of Freedom. And let me tell you about freedom.

Freedom is a basic human right. A free person is able to make decisions on their own without anyone interfering, and they are able to express their ideas freely. It is the air to breathe. It is what drives people to explore new ideas and be creative. Freedom brings out what is best in all of us.

Someone who does not have the right to express their ideas is actually imprisoned. A human being with no freedom is a body without a soul. The more restrictions are on us, the darker life feels. Freedom is your right to be different, to be yourself. Songs chirped by a bird on a tree are lovelier than songs sung by a bird in a cage.

Just as we love to enjoy our freedom, we must believe in the freedom of others and respect it. Your freedom ends where the freedom of the other begins. In fact, freedom goes hand in hand with responsibility.

Now, think about how the air is wandering freely in the vast atmosphere with no restrictions of any kind!

It is time for your first adventure, Mohab and Afifa. First, you should be looking for a hint that will show you the way to the key. According to the map, the surface of the owl-shaped enclosure is one square kilometer. After you find the hint, you will be able to find the key.

It is almost sunset. You will fly on Yumn and Baraka, your giant whooper swans. They are docile and friendly. I raised them and named them myself.

Once you get to the Sahara Desert, you have a couple of hours to find the hint, and then the key of freedom. You should be back here before tomorrow’s sunset.

Mohab and Afifa got on the giant birds. The Sage bid them farewell with a confident, encouraging smile. And the two birds set off flying through a calm, starry sky. Minutes later, Mohab said to Afifa:

- Tell me about Africa, Afifa.

Afifa closed her eyes for a moment, and she opened them saying:

- Africa is a beautiful continent full of riches. It is the second largest continent in size and population after Asia. In Africa, we find Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya. There is also the Nile, which is the world's longest river; and the Sahara, which is the world's largest hot desert. The Nile flows through eastern Africa for thousands of kilometers from Lake Victoria to the Mediterranean Sea. And the Sahara Desert extends from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea.

Mohab said with a smile:

- Do you know, Afifa, that there is a connection between the Sahara Desert in Africa and the Amazon Forest in South America?

- No, Mohab.

- I will tell you about it when we visit South America, my friend. And what are the animals unique to Africa?

- In Africa we can find the aardvark, the okapi, the ostrich, the aye-aye, the giraffe, the addax and the zebra.

Mohab and Afifa smiled to each other. And then, as soon as they fell asleep, the two giant birds burst like two arrows slashing the sky.

Yumn and Baraka reached North Niger, so they made gentle sounds to wake up the two heroes. Mohab and Afifa woke up, yawned, stretched, and wiped their faces with their hands. Mohab asked:

- Did you sleep well my friend?

Afifa answered smiling:

- I did. What about you?

- I slept well too.

While having breakfast, Mohab said:

- Time is ticking, Afifa. The first thing we should do is search for the hint.

- Yes, my friend. We must fly at a low altitude to examine the desert sands and look for an owl-shaped enclosure.

- Yes, its size should not exceed one square kilometer.

The birds dropped to a low altitude, and the two friends started looking for an owl-shaped enclosure on the sparkling yellow sands. As the sun rose slowly, temperature rose too. It was obvious that the weather would get hotter and hotter.

Dry breezes blew throughout the desert. Just like vast waves of an open ocean, yellow winding dunes of sand covered the surroundings to the horizons. They were flying under a clear blue glass sky.

The two children spotted an area surrounded by an owl-shaped wooden enclosure, so they landed quickly and hopped off the giant birds. Mohab said:

- We will separate, my friend, and we will search the area in an orderly manner until we find the hint.

- And the one who finds it should call for the other.

Mohab nodded in approval, and the two friends ran enthusiastically opposite sides to search for the hint.

After two hours of earnest searching, Mohab heard Afifa's voice calling him happily:

- Mohab, O Mohab! I found a bottle with a message in it, my friend!

Mohab hurried towards Afifa, they opened the bottle, took out the message and read:

“Through thirst and heat

Gold and silver do meet”

The two friends looked at each other, and Afifa said:

- What could this hint mean?

Mohab said, thinking:

- What do gold and silver stand for?

Afifa thought for a minute, and then she said:

- Gold symbolizes the shiny sand, my friend, and silver symbolizes the glittering water!

- Good. And in the desert, where can we find water?

- In the oasis, of course!

Mohab replied:

- Exactly. So let's check the map again.

The two friends examined the map, and they spotted an oasis of palm trees nearby.

Mohab said:

- We should look in the nearby oasis for a source of water. And there we shall find the key of freedom.

Mohab and Afifa flew towards the oasis, and as soon as they reached it they began the search for the Key of Freedom. They spent several hours searching, until Afifa suddenly shouted:

- Mohab! Come on my friend, I found a guelta, and near it there is a strange chest!

Mohab hurried to Afifa. The two friends opened the chest and found the Key of Freedom in it! They laughed happily, and then they hurried to their loyal birds. The two birds soared high into the sky.

Mohab said:

- Can you tell me about the history of Africa, Afifa?

- Africa was the birthplace of many great civilizations and empires, including Ancient Egypt, the Kingdom of Kush, the Kingdom of Aksum, Carthage, and the Songhai Empire.

Mohab nodded approvingly, and then said:

- What about slavery? I believe it was a big part of African history.

Afifa replied in a sad tone:

- Indeed my friend. Long ago, slavery was widespread in Africa. It had different forms including pawnship, domestic service and chattel slavery. Moreover, African slaves were transported by ships in poor conditions from Africa to Europe and the New World in order to work as laborers in plantations and elsewhere. It is called the slave trade.

- By the New World you mean the Americas. So we can say that African slaves built Europe and the New World.

- Yes. In fact, African slaves and Africa's riches fueled the Industrial Revolution in Europe.

- Indeed. And we will be talking more about the Industrial Revolution when we go to Europe, my friend.

The two heroes fell asleep. They reached the village in the afternoon, and the Sage welcomed them joyously.

* * * * *

Chapter 3: Key of Justice

The Sage gave Mohab the map of Europe, and said:

- Your second destination is Europe, more specifically the coast north of Germany. The key you will be bringing from Europe is the Key of Justice. And let me tell you about justice.

Justice is the equality between people in rights and duties, so that the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor receive the same treatment and the same expectations. Justice builds bridges of trust between people. Justice guarantees equality, equality guarantees security and security guarantees happiness. On the other hand, injustice results in feelings of grudge and fear, causing chaos, and then torment, agony and tears.

Justice uproots hatred and sows respect and friendliness, just like a farmer plows his land, removes thorns and weeds and then plants flowers and trees.

Everyone should have the basic rights such as food, clothing, shelter and medical treatment. Unfortunately, the world is full of hungry, sick and homeless people.

Look at how the air is circulating fairly and equally among all living creatures. Humans and animals breathe in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, and plants take carbon dioxide and give oxygen. And thus, a fair natural balance is maintained and is justly offered to all creatures, and so we all live in harmony.

Then, Mohab and Afifa got on Yumn and Baraka. The giant whooper swans set off flying. Afifa said:

- Tell me about Europe, Mohab.

- Europe is called a “peninsula of peninsulas”, my friend.

- What is a peninsula?

- An island is a land surrounded by water. A peninsula is like an island, but only surrounded by water on three sides. Europe is surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea in the South, the Atlantic Ocean in the West, and the Arctic Ocean in the North. The Tabernas Desert is Europe's only desert. In Europe, the highest mountain is Mount Elbrus, and the longest river is Volga.

- And what are the animals unique to Europe?

- In Europe we can find the Iberian lynx, the European mink, and the Norwegian lemming.

The two friends dove into a peaceful sleep, and the two birds flew at full speed. Yumn and Baraka reached the coast North of Germany, so Mohab and Afifa woke up, and they had breakfast.

The refreshing salty sea breezes and the soothing sound of sea waves welcomed the two heroes. The rising sun reflected gold rays upon the deep blue seawater. The birds dropped to a low altitude above the beach in search for the owl shape. Around them waves were crashing against the shore and the wind was blowing lightly. The two friends smelled salt as it drifted through the air. Eventually, the two heroes spotted the owl-shaped enclosure extending on the beach sands. They landed and started searching for the hint. Mohab found a bottle half buried into the sand, so he called for Afifa. They opened the bottle and read:

"Through darkness and sorrow

Light pierces like a sharp arrow"

Mohab said:

- We have two essential words here: Darkness and light. What could they refer to? We should consider the fact that we are on a coast.

Afifa said:

- Well, the only thing I can think of is a lighthouse. Its light guides the ships through the fearful darkness.

Mohab said smiling:

- That is right my friend. So we should fly over the beach again and look for a lighthouse nearby.

Afifa nodded approvingly, and they flew over the coast. But after meticulous search, they did not spot any lighthouse. Mohab said:

- Time is ticking my friend, and there is no lighthouse in sight. We should land again and check the map for a clue.

They examined the map once again, and they saw an island nearby. The island had the shape of a seahorse.

Afifa said:

- We should fly to this island. There must be a lighthouse there.

Mohab replied:

- Yes, islands usually have lighthouses.

They flew over the island, and they discovered a small red-and-white lighthouse! They landed quickly and went into it, and they found a chest. They opened it and there was the Key of Justice. They shared a joyful laugh, and then they quickly got on Yumn and Baraka, and the two birds set off on a journey back to the village.

Afifa said:

- Can you tell me about the history of Europe, Mohab?

- Well, I will tell you about three milestones in European history: the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution.

- Okay.

- The Renaissance was a period of time during the fifteenth century, between the Dark Ages and modern times. It was a cultural movement, a rebirth of education, literature, art, philosophy and science. The word "renaissance" is French for "rebirth".

The Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, was a powerful cultural movement during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It focused on the use of reason or logical thinking, and science rather than tradition. Thinkers, in that era, wrote the first large encyclopedia that was available to everyone for learning.

The Industrial Revolution started in the eighteenth century. It was a period of major changes in manufacturing, which affected agriculture and transportation. Before the Industrial Revolution, people worked in small workshops and made products by hand. After the Industrial Revolution, products were made in large quantities by machines in factories. Unfortunately though, the Industrial Revolution triggered global warming due to the excessive use of fossil fuels which leads to the emission of heavy quantities of greenhouse gases. And we will be talking more about global warming in the upcoming days.

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Chapter 4: Key of Awareness

The Sage gave Mohab the map of North America, and said:

- Your third destination is North America, more specifically the Grand Canyon in the USA. The key you will be bringing from North America is the Key of Awareness. And let me tell you about awareness.

Self-awareness is to be conscious of one's own thoughts, feelings and strengths and weaknesses. Situational awareness is to notice, understand and analyze what is going on around us.

Awareness builds confidence. Being aware of your own thoughts and feelings gives you better control over your actions and reactions. And so, your personality becomes stronger and more charismatic.

It is better to be more aware than smarter, so open up your senses, and be insightful about what goes on around you. Awareness requires good attention to details. One should always understand and analyze complex situations, in order to grasp suitable solutions.

Now, let us be aware of the sensitive role of greenhouse gases: They are positive and necessary to regulate the temperature of the Earth. But when they exceed the natural rate, they become negative and harmful as they cause global warming.

Mohab and Afifa got on Yumn and Baraka. The giant whooper swans spread their wings and flew high into the sky. Afifa said:

- Tell me about North America, Mohab.

- North America and South America are known as the New World, or the Americas. North America is a

continent located entirely on the northern hemisphere. It is bordered by three oceans: the Atlantic, the Arctic and the Pacific. North America is the only continent that has all types of climate. The Grand Canyon is considered to be the planet’s biggest natural rift. In North America we find: The Mississippi which is one of the longest rivers, Death Valley which is one of the hottest places, and Mammoth Cave which is the longest cave system on the planet. Alaska and Greenland are part of North America. Greenland is the world's largest island, and it is almost entirely covered in ice.

- And what are the animals unique to North America?

- In North America we can find the bald eagle, the pronghorn and the black bear.

Then, the two friends fell asleep. Yumn and Baraka reached the Grand Canyon, so Mohab and Afifa woke up, and they had breakfast. Mohab said:

- It is time to look for the hint, Afifa.

Afifa said:

- Yes. But is it not hard to search the whole Grand Canyon, with all its valleys and plateaus? As you said, it is the planet’s biggest natural rift!

Mohab smiled and said confidently:

- Do not be intimidated my friend. The Sage once told me that the universe is humanity’s park.

Heavy silence reigned in the majestic Grand Canyon. Flat plateaus, tall peaks and vast deep valleys and crevasses stretched to the horizons. The air was dry, the land barren with scattered bushes, and the rocks arid and baked. Wind howled constantly. The two birds dropped to a low altitude in search for the hint, flying over plateaus and mountains. Finally, Mohab and Afifa saw

the owl enclosure extending on a vast plateau. They landed and started searching for the hint. After tedious efforts, Afifa found the hint bottle under a small rock, so she yelled for Mohab. They opened the bottle and read the message:

“It slowly does slither,

It trots and bends a river”

Afifa said:

- Let’s check the map again.

- Yes, we should look for a river, follow its course through the canyon and look for a specific curve.

They unfolded the map, and they surprisingly discovered the river wriggling like a long snake.

- It is a curvy river. There are a lot of meanders. How are we going to find the right meander?

Mohab said thinking:

- There’s the word “trot” in the hint. What does this word make you think of?

- The horse trots.

Mohab brightened up saying:

- Exactly. The meander we are looking for is Horseshoe Bend!

Afifa rejoiced said:

- So we should fly to Horseshoe Bend. There we shall find the Key of Awareness!

Mohab nodded approvingly. They both flew to the horseshoe-shaped meander, and there they found a chest. They opened it and there was the Key of Awareness!

Delighted, they quickly got on Yumn and Baraka, and the two birds spread their wings and flew high into the sky.

Afifa said:

- Can you tell me about the history of North America, Mohab?

- The history of North America is the history of Native Americans. The Age of Discovery started in 1492 with Christopher Columbus's voyages to North America, although Khashkhash Ibn Saeed set foot on the Americas centuries before Columbus.

Sadly, the European exploration was a disaster for Native Americans as they were annihilated.

Native Americans are people of wisdom. They are awe-inspiring. They have many different tribes including Cherokee, Apache, Cheyenne and Navajo. They were expert survivors and craftsmen. Each tribe had their own unique culture, traditions, clothing, food and tools. Native Americans were very creative in building homes, including teepees, wigwams and cliff dwellings. There are many famous Native Americans like: Geronimo, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse and Black Elk. Native Americans developed unique art forms such as pottery.

Now, do you know, Afifa, that the Native Americans share many similarities with the Australian Aborigines?

- No.

- I will be telling you more about it when we go to Australia, my friend.

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Chapter 5: Key of Openness

The Sage gave Mohab the map of South America, and said:

- Your fourth destination is South America, more specifically the jungles in Bolivia. The key you will be bringing from South America is the Key of Openness. And let me tell you about openness.

We must show interest in how the others view the world. Being open to other people's opinions and ideas does not mean that we necessarily agree with them, it rather means that we respect them and accept their right to differ in their views of life.

Diversity results in richness not hatred. People should share their ideas and experiences, and open up about their own thoughts and feelings. In that way, knowledge accumulates and gets enriched.

If you do not understand the speaker’s ideas, ask for further explanation. Ask thoughtful questions to keep the conversation interesting. You should listen without making judgments. Listen in order to understand, not to judge or quarrel. Seeing the world through someone else’s eyes helps you understand their thoughts and feelings better. And remember to slow down in your reactions.

Openness requires humility, tolerance and respect. It is helpful to explore new cultures, traditions and beliefs. This makes it easier to accept and coexist with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Look at how all people without exception breathe air. The air is available for everyone; it does not distinguish between people on any basis.

Then, Mohab and Afifa got on the giant birds, and the two birds set off flying. Afifa said:

- Tell me about South America, Mohab.

- South America is also called Latin America. In South America we find: the Atacama Desert which is the driest place on earth, Salar de Uyuni which is the largest salt flat, the Andes which is the longest mountain range and the Angel Falls which is the highest waterfall. The Amazon River is the world's largest river; it runs through Earth’s lungs, the Amazon rainforest, which is the largest rainforest on Earth. In fact, rainforests are a wonderful ecosystem, they offer a great diversity of wildlife.

- There is a majestic rainforest in Africa too, the Congo.

- Yes, it is the second largest rainforest on the planet.

- I remember you told me that there is a connection between the Sahara Desert in Africa and the Amazon Forest in South America. Could you please explain the nature of this connection, Mohab?

- Ecosystems of the planet are deeply interconnected. For example, The Sahara Desert supplies the Amazon rainforest with essential minerals for fertilization. Yearly, powerful winds sweep up dust from the Sahara Desert in Africa, transport it over the Atlantic Ocean, and deposit it in the Amazon Rainforest in South America. Dust containing vital minerals helps the jungle flourish.

- That’s wonderful! And what are the animals unique to South America?

- In South America we can find the capybara, the Galápagos tortoise and the Andean condor.

When Yumn and Baraka reached the jungle in Bolivia, Mohab and Afifa woke up, and they had breakfast.

Morning breezes were fresh and damp. Dark green spots proliferated below the two heroes. All they could see was a never-ending dense undergrowth. Massive trees were standing watch over everything else. As the sun rose, the jungle started to teem with life, and various sounds of wild animals burst everywhere. The distinct sounds culminated together magically to create what seemed to be the symphony of nature.

The birds dropped to a low altitude. After meticulous searching, Mohab and Afifa distinguished a chain of red-colored tips of trees. Together, the trees made what looked like a broad owl shape. The two heroes landed inside and started searching for the hint in the jungle. Eventually, Mohab found the hint bottle under a majestic tree, so he yelled calling for Afifa. They opened the bottle and read the message:

"There are no clouds

Yet heavy rain astounds"

Afifa said:

- What could this hint be referring to?

Mohab thought for a while, and then he said:

- The paradox here is in the existence of rain and the absence of clouds. So what could this mean?

- When we say rain we say water.

- Yes. So is there a way water can be falling without clouds?

Afifa thought for a second, and then she burst in joy:

- Waterfalls, of course!

Mohab said smiling:

- Exactly, my friend.

They examined the map, and they saw the picture of a waterfall in the middle of the jungle. They both flew to the majestic waterfall and they sneaked under the falling waters to find a recently-dug small cave. They entered the cave and found a chest. They opened it and there they found the Key of Awareness!

They laughed joyfully, and then they quickly got on Yumn and Baraka. The two birds set off on a journey back to the village.

Afifa said:

- Can you tell me about the history of South America, Mohab?

- Many civilizations flourished in South America, such as the Inca and the Muisca. The Incan Empire was the largest empire in the continent. Incas settled in the Andean region in the West. Their language was the Quechua, and they were skillful architects. Machu Picchu is a magnificent citadel built by Incas. They also fashioned beautiful ceramics and textiles.

Another great civilization is the Muisca. They are also called Chibcha. They settled north of the continent. They were farmers, miners, traders and manufacturers. They built houses with materials such as clay and wood, with conical roofs. Mesoamerica is a region in Central America extending from northern Costa Rica to central Mexico. Many powerful kingdoms flourished in Mesoamerica, including the Olmecs, the Maya and the Aztecs. Spanish and Portuguese explorers started invading South America in the fifteenth century. Diseases brought by the explorers caused most of the native people to die, because they had no immunity.

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Chapter 6: Key of Creativity

The Sage gave Mohab the map of Antarctica, and said:

- Your fifth destination is Antarctica in the South Pole, more specifically Ellsworth Land. Antarctica is covered in ice, and so it is very cold. Fortunately, we are in January, which means it is summer in Antarctica. And in summer, temperature is somewhat bearable, especially at coasts.

Let me tell you about some differences between the Antarctic Continent and the Arctic Ocean. Antarctica is a frozen land surrounded by sea, while the Arctic is a frozen ocean surrounded by land. Antarctica is in the Southern Hemisphere, and the Arctic is in the Northern Hemisphere. In Antarctica, summer starts in October and ends in March, and winter starts in March and lasts until October. On the other hand, in the Arctic Ocean, summer starts in March and ends in October, and winter starts in October and lasts until March. During winter, the sea ice around Antarctica almost doubles in size. The Arctic ice sheet gains in size too during winter.

The key you will be bringing from Antarctica is the Key of Creativity. And let me tell you about creativity.

All people are born creative, because all people are born endowed with a sense of curiosity and a love for learning and discovery.

Freedom of thinking and the power of imagination are the way to creativity. Much like the sky is full of bright stars, imagination is full of brilliant ideas. In fact, the creative mind is buzzing with ideas, just like a beehive or an ant kingdom.

Creativity opens up new horizons and reveals hidden talents and energies. It frees the mind from the shackles of common ideas. Creativity makes you look at situations from a different angle and helps you assess and solve all sorts of problems. It gets you thinking in new ways, thinking out of the box.

Too many rules kill creativity. A creative person expresses their thoughts and feelings freely. They are very sensitive and get inspiration from small details in any surroundings, and they view the world differently from ordinary people.

The ship is safe on the shore, but it is built to sail through the sea. The balloon is also safe on the surface of the earth, but it is made to float up in the sky. As such, the mind is also made to travel through imagination and explore new ideas.

The air is a mixture of gases, mainly nitrogen and oxygen, and other gases such as carbon dioxide, water vapor, helium and methane. Now, hot air balloons work on a simple principle: Hot air is less dense than cold air, so hot air rises while cold air sinks. The hot air inside the balloon is less dense than the air surrounding it, so it floats upwards.

The Sage gave Mohab and Afifa heavy coats, thick wool sweaters and gloves to wear. He also dressed Yumn and Baraka in warm wool garments.

The giant birds set off flying, and Afifa said:

- Tell me about Antarctica, Mohab.

- The Antarctic Continent is also called the White Continent or Frozen Continent. Antarctica is the highest, coldest, driest, windiest and emptiest place on Earth. It is the largest reservoir of fresh water. The Antarctic

Continent is divided by the Transantarctic Mountains into two parts: Western Antarctica and Eastern Antarctica. East Antarctica is the larger part of the continent. Antarctica has active volcanoes. It is home to Mount Erebus which is one of the most active volcanoes on the planet. Antarctica also has numerous sub-glacial lakes. The largest of them is Lake Vostok. Deep Lake is so salty that it cannot freeze; it remains liquid at very low temperatures. Blood Falls is an outflow of red water emerging from ice fissures in Antarctica.

Now, the Arctic Ocean, Antarctica and the whole planet are threatened by global warming.

- What is global warming, Mohab?

- Global warming is the rise of the atmosphere's temperature. It is the result of excessive emission of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane. And as I told you when we went to Europe, it all began with the Industrial Revolution.

Now, though the Arctic Ocean and Antarctica may seem remote, they actually have a crucial role in maintaining the stability of life on our planet. Global warming causes the ice to melt, and the melting of ice threatens the planet in so many ways.

- How does the melting of ice threaten the planet?

- First of all, sheets of ice are important as they protect our planet by reflecting sun rays away into outer space, and this maintains the atmosphere's temperature at a moderate level. Moreover, the melting of ice would lead to the extinction of animal species that depend on it like polar bears and seals. Furthermore, ice melting changes salinity and density of ocean waters, therefore disrupting ocean currents. Also, when ice melts, it raises sea level; and when sea level rises, it causes erosion, flooding and

contamination of fresh water sources. Now, just imagine that if all of Antarctica's ice melts, it will raise the sea level to 60 meters!

Meanwhile, in the Arctic regions, global warming causes permafrost to melt.

- What is permafrost?

- Permafrost is ground that is permanently frozen. It stores large amounts of methane and toxic mercury. It also contains harmful bacteria frozen long ago. When permafrost melts, methane is released into the atmosphere, which aggravates global warming. Mercury is also released into water, poisoning it and destroying marine food chains. And bacteria, once released, they would cause the spread of unknown, fatal diseases.

Afifa said in worry:

- All you said about global warming is really scary!

Mohab nodded in approval saying:

- Yes, it is. And there are many other disastrous effects caused by global warming such as extreme weather events like heatwaves, droughts, storms and floods.

- And what can we do to reduce the negative impact of global warming?

- We can minimize the effects of global warming in many ways such as recycling, planting trees and using clean energy resources to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases.

- Ok. And what are the animals unique to Antarctica?

- In the Frozen Continent we can find many types of penguins: the chinstrap penguin, gentoo penguin, emperor penguin, king penguin and adélie penguin. Meanwhile, in the Arctic Ocean we find polar bears and seals.

Now, the word ‘Arctic’ comes from the Greek word “Arktos”, which means “bear”. It is believed that this name refers to two constellations named ‘Ursa Minor’ or Little Bear, and ‘Ursa Major’ or Great Bear. In any case, it is a name that suits the ocean because it is there where polar bears live. On the other hand, Antarctica was named as such because there are no polar bears living on it.

When Yumn and Baraka reached the White Continent, Mohab and Afifa woke up. The weather was frosty, blowing raw, frigid breezes. The birds dropped down and flew over Ellsworth Land on a low altitude. It was impossible for the two friends not to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the scenery: they were flying over a cold, iced desert. The powder-white landscape below them was so peaceful and silent that it seemed lifeless. Finally, Mohab and Afifa spotted the owl-shaped enclosure extending on a square kilometer of ice. The two heroes landed and started searching for the hint. Afifa found the hint bottle, so she yelled for Mohab. They opened the bottle and read:

“You are looking for the right land

And Antarctica can lend you a hand”

The two heroes thought for a moment. Afifa said:

- Let’s check the map again.

They examined the map, and Mohab noticed an extension in the form of a peninsula near Ellsworth Land.

Mohab said enthusiastically:

- We should fly to the Antarctic Peninsula. It is the hand that will give us the Key of Creativity.

Afifa looked at Mohab smiling, and said:

- But where to search?

- Let us fly over there and see if we can find something.

Yumn and Baraka flew over the Antarctic Peninsula in search for any clue. The weather was icy and exhausting, the white field below them seemed endless, but finally the two heroes distinguished what looked like a hand picture drawn on ice. They joyfully urged the two birds to land inside the hand. It was not a hard job to search for a chest on a pure white surface. Once found, they opened it, and there was the Key of Creativity.

They laughed cheerfully, and then they quickly got on the giant birds, and they flew back to the village.

Afifa said:

- Can you tell me about the history of Antarctica, Mohab?

- Before 1840, Antarctica was called 'Terra Australis Incognita' which meant 'The Unknown Southern Land'. Many expeditions contributed to the gradual discovery and exploration of Antarctica. The first official discovery of Antarctica was in 1820. After that, the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration started at the end of the nineteenth century. Seventeen major expeditions were sent to explore Antarctica thoroughly.

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Chapter 7: Key of Teamwork

The Sage gave Mohab the map of Asia, and said:

- Your sixth destination is Asia, more specifically Mount Fuji in Japan. The key you will be bringing from Asia is the Key of Teamwork. And let me tell you about teamwork.

The human being needs to be part of a community. Togetherness is a blessing. In order for life to prosper, people should help and support one another. An ant cannot make a vast kingdom by itself, and a bee cannot build a well-organized hive by itself. It is a relentless teamwork effort.

Long ago, human beings found themselves compelled to coexist and help one another in the daily pursuit of food, clothing and shelter. They devised efficient ways to protect themselves from the dangers of wildlife and adapt to the forces of nature.

Teamwork builds trust among people. It eliminates selfishness and arrogance, and encourages hard work and innovation. It enriches ideas and widens perspectives leading to wiser decisions.

Teamwork saves time and effort. People cooperate and distribute efforts among them. The talents of everyone are put together in harmony to produce the best results and reach great achievements fast and with little effort. And so it is easier to overcome difficulties and solve problems.

Look at how each gas contributes to the harmonious mixture of the air, creating global equilibrium. Each gas has its own role and properties. The amount of each gas

does not change, and if it ever changes, this will lead to severe environmental disasters.

As Yumn and Baraka flew high into the sky, Afifa said:

- Tell me about Asia, Mohab.

- Asia is the world's largest continent in size and population. The regions of Asia are: North Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, West Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Asia’s longest rivers include: Yangtze, Yellow River and Mekong. Mount Everest, the highest peak on Earth, is part of the Himalayas in Asia. In fact, Asia is home to the ten highest peaks in the world!

- Ok. By the way, how are mountains formed, Mohab?

- Mountains are the result of tectonic forces. First of all, continents were once, long ago, one massive continent called Pangae. Pangae slowly broke apart and divided into the actual continents.

Now, Earth's outer layer is called lithosphere. It is divided into plates, continental and oceanic. We can think of plates like pieces of a puzzle. Below the lithosphere is the asthenosphere. Plates are moving very slowly above the asthenosphere. The movement of plates may create mountains, volcanoes, earthquakes on land, and mountains, ridges and trenches under the ocean.

- And what are the animals unique to Asia?

- In Asia we can find the tarsier, the panda, the red panda and the saola.

The two friends fell into a peaceful sleep. As soon as Yumn and Baraka reached Mount Fuji, Mohab and Afifa woke up, and they had breakfast. Mohab said:

- Let’s fly over the mountain and search for the owl enclosure, my friend.

The birds flew above Mount Fuji. The awe-inspiring mountain rose in splendor, standing proud and majestic against the clouds, sending its graceful peak tipped with snow to reach for the sky. Its dark, steep slopes dropped down to a wide dominating base. Mohab and Afifa looked for the owl enclosure on the mountain slopes. At last, they spotted it, so they landed and started searching for the hint. Mohab found the hint bottle under a rock, so he shouted calling for Afifa. They opened the bottle and read:

"Search where air is cleansed

And hatchlings are nursed"

Mohab said:

- The place where birds build their nests is the same place where carbon dioxide is absorbed and oxygen is released.

Afifa said instantly:

- Trees, of course!

- Indeed my friend. Trees and plants cleanse the air through photosynthesis.

- I guess we will be looking for the key in a nearby forest.

Mohab smiled and nodded in agreement, and they checked the map again. They noticed a forest of sakura trees near Mount Fuji.

Afifa said:

- We should fly to this forest and search among the sakura trees. There we shall find the Key of Teamwork.

The two friends flew to the forest and were enchanted by the marvelous pink flowers blooming all around them, spreading a soft scent of blossom, and started an

exhaustive search. Afifa found a chest entangled in the branches of a great sakura tree. She called for Mohab, and they both took it down, opened it and there was the Key of Teamwork. They smiled happily, and then they quickly got on Yumn and Baraka, and the two birds soared into the sky on a journey back to the village.

Afifa said:

- Can you tell me about the history of Asia, Mohab?

- Asia is the birthplace of the world's major religions. It also saw the birth of three great ancient civilizations: Indus Valley Civilization, Chinese Civilization and Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia had remarkable empires including: The Akkadian, Assyrian and Babylonian empires. Many other great empires emerged in Asia such as: the Persian Empire, the Umayyad and Abbasid empires, the Mongols and Mughals.

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Chapter 8: Key of Inner Peace

The Sage gave Mohab the map of Australia, and said:

- Your seventh and last destination is Australia, more specifically the Great Barrier Reef. The key you will be bringing from Australia is the Key of Inner Peace. And let me tell you about inner peace.

Positive values are the way to inner peace. A person should adopt a set of positive values and put them into practice in their daily lives. And if one day they act contrary to the values they believe in, inner peace is disrupted. So live your life according to your values and principles, and be true to yourself.

Inner peace is also the result of the balance among mind, heart, soul and body. The mind thrives on intellectual activities like reading and playing chess. Taking care of the heart requires having positive emotions and healthy relationships. The soul blossoms on meditation, volunteering and doing acts of kindness. The body requires practicing sports and workouts. Inner peace is the result of intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical equilibrium.

Inner peace builds self-confidence and produces serenity. It helps you face and withstand difficult life situations, and it allows you to be in control of your choices and your life. You should make your decisions according to the values you believe in. Keep life simple and deal with situations in simplicity and composure.

You should value your efforts and celebrate your achievements. Take a moment to enjoy and feel gratitude for your daily activities. And always remember that you

only can change what you control, while you have to accept what goes on outside of your control.

A person in a state of inner peace is balanced and happy. Find happiness in yourself. Be happy on your own first, and then go out and spread happiness among people.

The ozone layer protects the living creatures on Earth, so they grow and thrive in peace and harmony. If a hole occurs in the ozone layer, it will deeply affect the Earth’s stability and equilibrium.

Mohab and Afifa got on the giant birds, and the two birds spread their wings and soared into the sky. Afifa said:

- Tell me about Australia, Mohab.

- Australia is the world's smallest continent; it is also known as an 'island continent'. It lies entirely on the South of the equator. Two-thirds of Australia is desert land. In Australia we find the Great Barrier Reef off the eastern coasts. It is the world's largest coral reef. It is the biggest living structure on Earth, and it stretches over more than 2000 kilometers. In fact, it can be seen from outer space!

- And what are the animals unique to Australia?

- In Australia we can find the kangaroo, the koala, the Tasmanian devil, the wombat, the quokka and the platypus.

Yumn and Baraka reached the Great Barrier Reef. Mohab and Afifa woke up, and they had breakfast. The two birds flew over the Great Barrier Reef in search for the owl enclosure. The air was revitalizing. Below, slow blue sea waves moved in harmony. Corals offered a beautiful spectacle of the colorful diversity of life.

Afifa said:

- What a beautiful scenery!

Mohab said:

- It is beautiful indeed. Unfortunately, it is threatened by bleaching.

- What is bleaching, Mohab?

- Global warming is causing oceans and seas to warm too much. When that happens, corals lose their vivid colors and turn white, and then die!

Mohab and Afifa saw floating timbers attached forming an owl shape. Yumn and Baraka landed, and Mohab and Afifa gazed at the glittering waters. Mohab said in an enthusiastic way:

- Ready for a refreshing dive my friend?

Afifa nodded smiling:

- Let’s do it!

Everywhere below the surface they saw a huge variety of marine life. In the sparkling blue ocean they saw shoals of tiny, brightly coloured fishes, and vivid corals like flowers in a spectacular garden. They dove energetically, and started looking for the hint among the beautiful, colorful corals. The breeze was caressing the gleaming surface in the rays of the sun. There were many kinds of beautiful fish swimming. Afifa finally found a message bottle hidden under a coral. She took it, went up and waited for Mohab to come up for breath, then she yelled for him joyfully, and they both swam to Yumn and Baraka. They got on their loyal birds, and Afifa took out the message and read:

"When you do think keen

Pink is surrounded by green"

The two heroes dove in deep thinking. Afifa said:

- This hint is hard my friend. What could pink and green refer to?

Mohab looked at Afifa for some time, and then smiled saying:

- I remember that the Sage once told me about a magnificent pink lake called Lake Hillier. It is located in an island south-west of Australia.

Afifa smiled in relief. They opened the map and looked at it. Mohab said:

- We are in north-east Australia, we should fly fast to the south-west where Middle Island is.

Afifa nodded approvingly. Yumn and Baraka flew to the Southwest. When they arrived, Mohab and Afifa swam into the bright-pink lake searching for the chest. Mohab finally found it, and so he called for Afifa. He took the chest out, opened it, and there was the last key, the Key of Inner Peace! The two heroes looked at each other happily and exhaled in triumph and peace. They shared a happy smile, and then they quickly got on Yumn and Baraka, and the two birds set off on a journey back to the village.

Afifa said:

- Can you tell me about the history of Australia, Mohab?

- The history of Australia resembles the history of North America in the fact that the American Indians were annihilated during the exploration of North America, and so were the Aboriginal Australians during the exploration of Australia.

- Can you explain more?

- The Aboriginal Australians are the native inhabitants of Australia. European explorers brought diseases,

slavery and violence to the aborigines. Since the arrival of the explorers, the aboriginal life was disrupted in a sad way, especially in Tasmania.

American Indians and Aboriginal Australians share many similarities. They were peaceful people. Some tribes of American Indians and Aboriginal Australians were nomads; it means they travelled from place to place in pursuit of suitable living conditions. They are highly-skilled farmers. They treasured family and togetherness. They cherished land and revered nature, and they did not believe in personal property. The American Indians and Aboriginal Australians are wonderful, awe-inspiring peoples with deep wisdom. They have rich cultures. They passed down their heritage, customs, traditions and wisdom through storytelling from generation to generation.

Mohab sighed in sorrow, and Afifa looked down in sadness too, while the two birds flew steadily through the sky towards the village.

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Chapter 9

On the eighth day, the Sage said:

- Well done, Mohab and Afifa. You have endured many hardships and overcame many obstacles, and you have successfully collected the seven keys right in time. I am proud of you.

Now, you will go fetch the message that will lead us to the palace where the secret word is. Valsiecho split the hint message into two parts. He put each part in a different palace. I did a lot of research about this part of Valsiecho's letter:

"two palaces lead to one palace:

when you're near you're far
when you're far you're near

a new palace from the past
with a big gate cannon's blast"

Then, the Sage smiled calmly saying:

- I solved these two riddles and found what palaces Valsiecho chose to put the message parts in. The first palace is Taj Mahal in Agra, India. And the second palace is Topkapi in Istanbul, Turkey.

Mohab and Afifa looked at each other. Mohab said:

- Can you please explain how the two hints in the letter lead to these two specific palaces, sir?

The Sage said smiling:

- Taj Mahal is a glorious monument built on the bank of the Yamuna River. The mausoleum is covered in white marble. It is a sublime building meant to celebrate true love. Taj Mahal is full of magnificent architectural wonders. One is the optical trick used in designing the main gate. It frames the view of the mausoleum in a dazzling way. As you move closer, the building seems to get farther. As you walk away, it seems to get nearer.

Topkapi is a monument that radiates magnificence and grandeur. It is located where the Bosphorus Strait meets the Marmara Sea. It is a spectacular building that celebrates majesty. Topkapi consists of four main courtyards and other smaller buildings. It has hundreds of rooms and chambers. It was originally called the “New Palace”. The current name “Topkapi” means “Cannon Gate”.

Then, the Sage urged our heroes to go retrieve the message parts as quickly as possible. Mohab set off on Yumn to Topkapi, while Afifa flew on Baraka to Taj Mahal.

After tedious efforts and meticulous searching, Mohab found a message half in a chest in the Tower of Justice, and Afifa found another message half in a chest inside the platform where lie the tombs of the two lovers, Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan. Flying back on their fast, loyal birds, they brought the two halves to the Sage the next day in the early afternoon.

As the Sage took the message halves, his hands were shaking in excitement and hope. He put the two halves

together in one way, and then the other. He read the message, and then breathed deeply saying:

topped by seven skies
there the answer lies

The Sage sat in his rocking chair thinking. Mohab and Afifa sat in front of him. Mohab and the Sage started discussing the message, while Afifa held Valsiecho's first letter reading it.

Afifa said talking to herself:

- I would have expected some kind of a dark, hostile letter written by a vicious monster. It is a fascinating paradox that the wicked Valsiecho chose a beautiful, elaborate rhyming style in his letter. Strangely, the letter is almost poetic!

The Sage turned abruptly towards Afifa, his eyes sparkling… "Poetic.. poetic.. poetic…" The word resonated in his head, as he suddenly stood up with wide open eyes..

"Poetic.. poetic.. poetic…"

"Poetry.. poetry.. poetry…"

All ideas suddenly interconnected, and all parts fit together perfectly! All just made sense in a dazzling way! Stunned, The Sage pronounced these words slowly:

- Poetry.. poetry.. poetry… Love, majesty, poetry…

He asked Afifa to give him the letter, and went to his desk almost running.

He put Valsiecho's first letter and last message on a big world map on his desk. Then he took a pencil, a ruler

and a drawing compass, and he draw a triangle on the map. He smiled and turned to Mohab and Afifa saying in relief:

- The triangle proportions fit perfectly! It all makes sense now! Taj Mahal is a masterpiece of love, and Topkapi is a triumph of majesty. The last palace is the AlHambra Castle, and it is a spectacle of poetry! The triangle on the letter perfectly matches the locations of the three palaces on the map!

Mohab and Afifa rejoiced and shared a joyful look! Then Mohab asked:

- What about the last message, sir? How does it refer to the Alhambra Palace?

- Son, there is a room in the Alhambra Palace that has a special ceiling with a wonderful decoration. The room is the Hall of the Ambassadors. Its ceiling is built and decorated in a way that represents the sky, or more specifically the seven skies!

In awe, Mohab and Afifa said together:

- Topped by seven skies, there the answer lies!

The Sage nodded smiling. He handed Mohab a map of The Alhambra and said:

- Mohab, Afifa, this will be your last journey to find the secret word. You will be going to the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. The Alhambra is a wonderful place dear to my heart!

Now, as you can see in the map, the Alhambra Palace consists of four main parts: Daraxa Garden, Palace of the Lions, Palace of Comares, and the Mexuar.

The original entrance to the AlHambra is the Tower of Justice, but to save time you will land in the Daraxa Garden, and then enter the Hall of the Two Sisters

through to the Court of Lions. Then you should head to the Court of the Myrtles and enter the Hall of the Ambassadors. You should find the secret word inside a chest there!

Mohab and Afifa, I suggest that you do not get lost in the breathtaking architectural beauty of the palace. Look for the secret word and bring it as quickly as possible, because time is ticking. And I promise that we will visit together the AlHambra someday to explore its wonders.

You will set off now on your last journey, and you should come back before sunset, in order for us to deactivate the bomb and save the village.

He handed them the seven keys, and they both hurried to their loyal birds with a confident smile on their faces.

* * * * *

The sun rose slowly spreading its golden rays on the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The view of the AlHambra from above offered to Mohab and Afifa a magnificent spectacle where roofs, courts, ponds, gardens and greenery blended in enchanting harmony to form a beautiful, colorful mosaic.

Yumn and Baraka landed peacefully in the Daraxa Garden. Mohab and Afifa were welcomed by a magical setting. They were surrounded by elegant trees and bushes, with the flowing sound of glittering water in a small elegant fountain, and the soft, melodic chirping of birds.

Mohab and Afifa enjoyed the wonderful view as they entered the Hall of the Two Sisters. Walls were covered in colored interwoven laces and beautiful inscriptions. Up into the ceiling, there was a majestic stalactite dome

with a star in the center. They went through the Court of the Lions. It was surrounded by thin, graceful columns. At the center there was a beautiful fountain ringed by twelve lions. Water flowed smoothly from the lions' mouths. Mohab and Afifa entered the Court of the Myrtles. Myrtle bushes surrounded a rectangular pond which received water from two fountains. The pond reflected the Comares Tower. Finally, they crossed the court toward the Hall of the Ambassadors.

Once inside, they looked up to the elaborate wooden ceiling. It had interlaced patterns and carved stars on various levels narrowing up to the top. It was more than a beautiful, well-designed roof. It was structured to represent the seven skies!

The chest lay in a corner, calmly waiting. Mohab and Afifa rejoiced at the sight of it! They hastened towards it and used the seven keys to open it. They found a rolled sheet of paper. Mohab and Afifa took it out of the chest, unfolded it, and they read the seven-letter word with eager, sparkling eyes.

With a joyful smile, they flew on Yumn and Baraka back to the village. And as soon as they arrived, carried away with happiness and excitement, they hurried to the Sage and gave him the rolled sheet of paper. The Sage smiled for them and unfolded it with shaking hands. He read the secret word in relief, and then reread it loudly:

ANDALUS

In relief and happiness, he hugged his two heroes in paternal affection.

Mohab said:

- Sir, you said that the AlHambra is dear to your heart. Can you explain why?

The Sage replied:

- We still have a couple of hours before sunset. The story of the AlHambra is a story of timeless beauty and awe-inspiring craftsmanship. The AlHambra Palace is a magnificent masterpiece where elegant architecture meets creative poetry, and the two merge with breathtaking natural landscapes. They all intertwine to produce a spectacular symphony, one of a kind.

The story of the AlHambra is also the story of Andalus. Long ago, during the Dark Ages, Europe was sleeping while Andalus was teeming with science, philosophy and art. Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of Andalusian books were burned, and so endless knowledge was reduced to ashes. A great scholar once said: “We have thirty books left behind from Andalusia, so that we could split the atom. If half of the one million burned books could survive, we would already travel between galaxies in space.”

Andalus was the foundation of the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras. In fact, Andalus is the birthplace of modern philosophy and science. With no Andalus in history, there would not have been any form of modern civilization.

The Alhambra is an eternal symbol of Andalusian pride. And there are buildings like the AlHambra Palace in the Maghreb: Al Qarawiyyin University, the Al-Attarine Madrasa, the Bahia Palace, the Madrasa Bou Inania, the Mechouar Palace. In fact, Al Qarawiyyin University was the first university ever built in history. It was founded by a woman, Fatima Al-Fihri.

The Sage, Mohab and Afifa shared a smile of relief. Then the Sage told Mohab to go gather the giants. And they all went to the village well. The Sage said:

- Mohab, you have the honor of putting in the secret word into the bomb to deactivate it. As soon as it is deactivated, detach it gently and take it out with you.

As soon as Mohab put in the word ANDALUS, the red letters turned into green. The bomb was deactivated! He detached it and took it out of the well. The Sage said to the giants:

- Now to make sure this thing never hurts anyone, I want you to fashion the sturdiest metal box. We will put this unwanted object in it and seal it. Then we will discard it safely.

The giants went to carry out the Sage's order. Tomorrow morning, they brought the metal box to the Sage. Afifa and Mohab were playing chess, while the Sage was sitting in his rocking chair thinking about the most appropriate place to dispose of the bomb, so as to reduce its impact to the minimum. Finally, the Sage said:

- The most appropriate place to dispose of the bomb is the Mariana Trench.

Mohab said:

- Can you please tell us about the Mariana Trench, sir?

- The Mariana Trench is located in the western Pacific Ocean, and it is crescent-shaped. It is the deepest trench on Earth, as it goes deeper than 10000 meters. In fact, it goes deeper than the highest mountain, Mount Everest!

Mohab listened carefully, and he said:

- It obviously seems that the Mariana Trench is a suitable place to dispose of this dangerous bomb. The ocean is so deep it will swallow the bomb, and as soon as the high pressure destroys it, the depths will neutralize the harmful gas.

The Sage nodded in approval and said:

- Indeed, the ocean will save us. By the way, oceans do save the whole world every day by absorbing huge amounts of carbon dioxide and producing huge amounts of oxygen. Unfortunately, the excessive amounts of carbon dioxide sinking into the ocean result in many ravaging effects like acidification of the water and bleaching of corals.

Afifa asked:

- But what about Valsiecho?

The Sage stared into the void for a minute, and then he stood up and went to the balcony. Mohab and Afifa followed him. There, the Great Tower was clearly visible. On the seventh floor, a black-and-red silhouette seemed to be surveying what goes on in the village. The Sage grabbed his telescope, put it on his eye and looked straight to the tower. He saw Valsiecho meditating. The Sage put down his telescope and sighed.

Mohab said:

- Valsiecho made use of the owl symbol a lot. This means he reveres wisdom. Why does a wise human being act in such an evil way?

- Son, the truth is that Valsiecho tries to hide his evil deeds with a façade of wisdom. He does that so as to accept his deeds and feel some sort of false inner peace. He is a smart man indeed. Yet every wise man is smart, but not every smart man is wise.

Mohab said:

- Indeed, he devised a genius, intricate plan, thinking we could never get through its riddles and clues. But the fact that he gave us time to try and defeat his plan, means that he wanted to give us a real chance of survival. Maybe the fact that we defeated him would bring back humility

to his soul. I believe it is time for him to declare that we are even.

Afifa said:

- Let us hope that his decision of isolation and meditation would enlighten him, chase away darkness from his soul and bring it back to forgiveness and kindness.

- You are right, Mohab and Afifa. An honest quest for the truth shall always be rewarded dearly.

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